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SUBJECT: IDENTIFYING MODERATES IN BAGHDAD

REF: BAGHDAD 1537

Classified By: Deputy Political Counselor Charles O. Blaha for reasons
1.4 (B) and (D).

¶1. (U) This is a Baghdad PRT reporting cable. This cable is the first of a series describing political moderates in Baghdad and efforts to encourage and empower moderates.

¶2. (C) Summary: Baghdad Province is home to many people who reject violence as a means to achieve political ends, respect the rule of law, believe in human rights for all regardless of sect, ethnicity or creed, and want to see a Baghdad that is again respected for its history, culture, prosperity, and progressive spirit. Many leaders representing this population risk their lives daily to participate in local government, academia, business and civil society organizations. Empowering this moderate population will help create a unified democratic federal Iraq that can govern itself, defend itself, sustain itself, and be an ally in the war on terror. Baghdad PRT has regular interaction with many of these moderate figures and is positioned to identify and empower moderate politicians and movements. End summary.

BACKGROUND TO MODERATE POLITICS IN BAGHDAD

¶3. (C) Baghdad has experienced immense political turbulence since 2003. The confluence of Coalition activities, inter-Iraqi factional conflict and regional meddling have complicated efforts to achieve a stable governance system that satisfactorily provides essential services to the province's inhabitants while redressing their perceived or actual historical grievances. This turbulence has generally empowered extremists and created an environment in which moderates have been marginalized, discredited, or silenced. The entrenchment of organized political parties closely associated with militias, and the existence of few credible political parties that are not the outgrowth of armed opposition or insurgent organizations has predisposed political activity in Baghdad since 2003 toward intolerant, extremist and winner-take-all behavior.

¶4. (C) Despite the preponderance of these extremist viewpoints and organizations, a population of moderate political and civic leaders can be identified in Baghdad. Baghdad PRT interacts with these moderates in a number of ways. Many are members of Baghdad's local councils. Some are moderate members of the political parties on Baghdad's Provincial Council. Others work in academia, business and civil society organizations.

LOCAL MODERATES VS. PARTISAN HARDLINERS

¶5. (C) In mid-2003, a local council system was established in Baghdad through the efforts of Coalition forces, local Iraqi

leaders and USAID's Local Governance Program (LGP I). In nearly 100 neighborhoods of Baghdad's metropolitan core area and 20 outlying villages, hundreds of local citizens stepped forward to create a transparent system of democratic input into a governance system that was opaque and dictatorial just a year earlier. Local council members were primarily responsible for voicing concerns about local essential services provision to technical authorities, but saw their roles expand by hosting town-hall meetings, responding to community needs and disseminating information in their neighborhoods. From regular interaction between these leaders and Embassy and Coalition partners over the past four years, we estimate that a significant portion of the roughly 1300 local council members serving in Baghdad are politically independent, moderate, and responsive to the local constituency that they represent.

16. (C) The January 2005 elections brought a new political body into being in Baghdad without any local constituencies. The new Baghdad Provincial Council (PC) was the result of a single-district party-list election, which resulted in a body of 51 members dominated by the major Shia parties, with SCIRI holding 28 of 51 seats. Because Sunnis boycotted the elections, there are no Sunni political parties represented on the council, and only one ethnic Sunni Arab -- a member of the Communist Party. PC members are not beholden to geographically determined constituents in the province; they follow the directives of their party leadership. In their governance of the province over the past two years, they have proved largely unresponsive to local council leaders and to the concerns of many Baghdad residents. As 'representatives' from areas such as Abu Ghraib, Mahmoudiya or Taji do not sit on the council, those largely Sunni areas have seen little attention from Baghdad's Shia-dominated provincial government.

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17. (C) Conflict between the local councils, still populated with volunteer local leaders, and the SCIRI-party-dominated PC began almost the moment the PC first met as a body in March 2005. The PC declared invalid the charters granting operational authority to the local councils, and declared that the only law relevant to provincial governance was Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) Order 71, which gave the PC wide and vague latitude. Throughout 2005 and much of 2006, the party-dominated PC did everything within its power to reduce the authority of local council leaders and to marginalize their activities. The PC dissolved the Baghdad City Council, a body made up of representatives from the District Councils, and installed a SCIRI PC member as the Mayor of Baghdad. The PC also replaced independent moderates with partisan loyalists in the leadership positions of Deputy Mayor for Municipalities, Deputy Mayor for Administration and Deputy Governor. Between 2005 and 2006, nearly all major provincial positions shifted from independent or technocrat to SCIRI or Sadrist. Ambiguities in governance law complicated political tensions between party loyalists at the PC and independent local council leaders. Differing interpretations of CPA Order 71, the selective use of historical Iraqi law, and uncertainty about future Constitutional or legislative initiatives provoked conflict as the PC struggled to exert its ill-defined authority and local councils feared outright dissolution.

MODERATES FIND COMMON GROUND WORKING ON COMMITTEES

18. (C) In recent months, Baghdad PRT has developed a closer relationship with the Baghdad Provincial Council (PC) and has encouraged more outreach from that body to local council leaders, particularly through activities on their functional committees. Observing the interaction of PC members and local council members during joint sessions of their committees has allowed PRT to identify key moderates on both the PC and the local councils.

¶9. (C) The Economic committees of the nine District Councils and six Qada Councils of Baghdad have met regularly with Dr. Kamel al-Shabibi, the Provincial Council Economic Committee Chair and the PC's budget director. During recent sessions the members have engaged in substantive debate on budget execution, and have launched microfinance offices across Baghdad to generate economic growth. Dr. Shabibi is a SCIRI party member, but often finds himself at odds with other members of his party for his outreach to the local councils and his cooperation with the PRT. Moderate members of the Sadr City District Council tell PRT that their work on economic development issues provides them one of the few outlets to engage with other like-minded moderates in the city. Directed not to engage directly with Coalition or Embassy personnel by Sadrist leaders on their council, the Sadr City moderates continue to attend sessions of this joint economic committee in defiance of Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) threats (reftel).

¶10. (C) A joint Civil Society committee session May 5 brought together Tariq al-Mondalawy (Da'wa) of the PC with over 20 members of Baghdad's local councils and a number of civil society organization leaders. The meeting provided an opportunity for charitable and social organizations to address their provincial leaders directly, who responded with pledges to commit resources to improve the welfare of Baghdad citizens. Several attendees were surprised by the candor expressed between the PC members and the local council leaders; they said that they expected the meeting to be far more contentious and far less productive.

ACADEMICS STRUGGLE TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

¶11. (C) PRT hosted an Academics Roundtable April 14 where professors from several Baghdad universities discussed their politics, their profession and their daily clashes with intolerance in Baghdad. Despite their varying backgrounds, ethnicities and ideologies, these academics found common ground in rejecting the option of violence as a means to solve Baghdad's problems. As educators, they said they view themselves in the vanguard of bringing Baghdad towards a better future. As intellectuals, they know the price of making a stand against extremism.

SOME PARTY MEMBERS ARE READY FOR A CHANGE

¶12. (C) Members of the major political parties on Baghdad's Provincial Council have candidly expressed their

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disillusionment with their political leadership and frustration with a political environment that is intolerant to compromise and collaboration. Prominent PC member Mazin Makiya has left Da'wa because of that party's overly 'religious' agenda and incompetent leadership. He holds his SCIRI colleagues in contempt due to their association with Iranian interests. Since his departure from Da'wa he has tried to build a coalition of others who share his passion to see a change in Iraqi politics. According to Mazin, every major political party is 'discriminatory' in nature -- and that fact is preventing real political progress. He said that he believes that voters should choose leaders based on their ideals, not their sectarian identity.

¶13. (C) Baghdad PRT continues to meet regularly with moderates in Baghdad, assessing ways to empower them and to increase the political space available for progressive, moderate and effective leaders.
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